

# The Harlem Renaissance by Leila Christenbury

## Influences on American Culture

- African American talent in music, writing, and art was introduced to mainstream America.
- Autobiographies provided firsthand accounts of the black experience.
- Dialects of African American vernacular speech enriched the English language.
- African Americans were recognized and celebrated for their contributions to American culture.

## The Harlem Renaissance

The place is Harlem, a densely populated section of New York City in which African Americans live and work. The time line is short, extending from the end of World War I through the mid-1930s. The event is nothing less than a renaissance, an explosion of creativity in poetry, prose, drama, music, and art.

**Harlem Comes to Life** After World War I, an exodus to the North known as the Great Migration brought thousands of African Americans together in New York City. Musicians, writers, painters, and students congregated to form a mecca of cultural affirmation and inspiration.

Geographically, the center of that movement was Harlem, the section of the borough of Manhattan that stands north of 110th Street. Its spiritual center, however, was not a place on the map but a place in the consciousness of a people whose gifts had long been ignored, patronized as “quaint,” or otherwise relegated to the margins of American culture. A new appreciation grew of the role of black talent in American culture when, hand in hand with the music echoing from New Orleans, Memphis, and Chicago, black poetry became part of the Jazz Age.

Langston Hughes wrote, “It was the period when the Negro was in vogue.” Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement was in full swing. Blues and jazz were becoming popular. An all-black Broadway show called *Shuffle Along* opened in 1921, introducing audiences to performers Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson, and Florence Mills. The art world was changed by the modernist European artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, whose work was influenced by African art. Mainstream

America was developing a new respect for African art and culture.

In the words of educator and critic Alain Locke, this cultural revolution helped the African American become accepted as “a collaborator and participant in American civilization.” Writers like Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston wrote about the African American experience, while artists like Aaron Douglas and William H. Johnson painted it. Photographer James Van Der Zee recorded it with his camera. Trumpet player Louis Armstrong and pianist Fletcher Henderson set it to music, while vocalists Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey sang it.

Harlem newspapers and journals, such as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, published the work of African American writers and sponsored literary contests to support intellectually gifted youth. These contests encouraged creative writing and rewarded young writers’ efforts with cash prizes and introductions to the most esteemed writers of the time.

African American writers strengthened the influence of black talent in America, focusing on different aspects of black life worldwide. They addressed inequalities of race, class, religion, and gender. Some writers attacked racism; others addressed social issues within black communities. The flourishing of African American writing helped affirm that black dialects were a vital part of American English.

**The African American Voice** Many writers, including Claude McKay and Countee Cullen, continued to write in standard English. While their works had a new tone, the forms and language they used were traditional. Other writers drew on African American oral tradition—dialect,





Civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois in the office of the NAACP's magazine *The Crisis* (top right).

the blues, folk tales, spirituals, and work songs. Two pioneers in adapting oral traditions in their work were writers Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Hughes was sensitive to the rhythms of African American music, and he was successful in capturing the inflections of African American speech. During the 1920s, Hughes, who invented blues and jazz poetry, read his poems to the accompaniment of jazz bands. Hurston drew on Southern black speech patterns to create a literary language filled with wit and metaphor.

**African American Autobiography** As American readers grew more familiar with the black experience, autobiography became the preferred genre for some African American writers. The tradition of the African American autobiography began with the genre of slave narratives, which reached a peak in the years before the Civil War. Narratives by Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass had helped bring about the emancipation of slaves. A masterpiece of autobiography, *Up from Slavery* (1901), had been written by Booker T. Washington.

In the years after the Harlem Renaissance, the genre of autobiography became more and more popular. Langston Hughes wrote two autobiographies.

His first, *The Big Sea*, contains a famous section on the Harlem Renaissance called "When the Negro Was in Vogue." Zora Neale Hurston wrote a celebrated—and controversial—autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1949). Along with poetry, fiction, and drama, autobiographical writing taught the country about African American experiences of racism, family life, politics, and social inequality.

**Decline of the Harlem Renaissance** By the early 1930s, the Great Depression had depleted the funds that had provided financial support to African American writers, institutions, and publications. This made it difficult for established artists to

continue nurturing new talent. Nevertheless, American culture was forever changed. The foundation was laid for writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Terry McMillan, Rita Dove, and many other African American artists. They could now make their feelings and experiences part of the American artistic expression: "I, too, sing America."

## Ask Yourself

1. How did the Harlem Renaissance help African Americans become more accepted in American society?
2. What are some themes and characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance?



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